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ABSTRACT

In light of "Mr. Bubbles," a case of a preschool operator who was accused and vindicated of sexually assaulting children, this study examined the public image of child care in western Sydney, Australia. Prime time television was reviewed for 1 week, with all channels monitored at least 5 hours per day, concentrating on prime time day and evening time slots. Video stores were searched for films portraying child care situations. From newspapers and tabloids, 100 articles referring to care and education of preschool children were analyzed. Also, 100 persons were surveyed regarding their image of child care. Findings revealed that child care use portrayed on television was nonexistent, whimsical, or misleading. Videos reflected anti-professional, negative, and evil images (e.g., Kindergarten Cop, The Hand that Rocks the Cradle). In the print media, negative images of child care outweighed positive images, with child care most frequently portrayed as an employment-related issue connected to economic rationalism. Slightly over half the respondents in the survey had a negative impression of child care and only 10 percent had positive comments about it. A large majority (80 percent) did not see a need for child care providers having a professional status, thought that child care was not well represented in the media (98 percent), and mentioned that abuse is the area that they hear about most (68 percent). (Contains eight references.) (KDFB)

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BEYOND MR BUBBLES: AN ANALYSIS OF THE PUBLIC IMAGE OF EARLY CHILDHOOD CARE AND EDUCATION IN WESTERN SYDNEY

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ABSTRACT

In 1988, a pre-school operator in Sydney was accused of sexually assaulting his charges during 'bath time'. The 'Mr Bubbles' affair garnered sensational headlines for many years. There is evidence that 'Mr Bubbles' (later vindicated of charges) still represents the image of child care in Western Sydney.

This article reports on a research study into the public image of child care as reflected in film, television, 'supermarket magazines' and the news media in Western Sydney in 1993. Over 100 items were analysed according to stakeholder interest and implied purpose and worth of child care. Findings indicate that negative images of child care outweigh positive images and that child care is most frequently portrayed as an employment related issue connected to economic rationalism. The benefits of early childhood care and education for children and the social justice goals of Early Childhood Care and Education were significantly under represented in the popular media.

It is argued that these images are influencing the public conception and concomitant political support for increased government intervention in child care. A survey of the public-at-large supported these findings. The media representation of child care appears to reinforce misconceptions about the field, to exacerbate parental guilt, to undermine the professional status of early childhood teachers and consequently, to inhibit focused advocacy of politicians for an expanded system of child care.

INTRODUCTION

The impetus for this research originated from my reaction to reading Susan Faludi's (1991) dissertation about the backlash in policies and attitudes towards women's rights. This reaction was actually a sense of *deja vu*. Her treatise about the demise of the feminist movement closely paralleled my own sense about how the support for, provision of, and practices associated with public child care seem regressive rather than progressive in 1990s. Faludi's (1991:xxii) thesis is summed up by these lines:

The backlash is not a conspiracy, nor are the people who serve its ends often aware of their role. For the most part its workings are encoded and internalised, diffuse and chameleonic. The force of the backlash churns beneath the surface largely invisible to the public eye. Taken as a whole these codes and cajolings, these whispers and threats and myths move overwhelmingly in one direction: they try to push women back into their "acceptable" roles. It pursues a divide and conquer strategy: single versus married women, working women versus homemakers, middle versus working class. It manipulates a system of rewards and punishments, elevating women who follow its rules, isolating those who don't. The

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backlash remarkers old myths about women as new facts and ignores all appeals to reason.

This notion of 'divide and conquer' has parallels in the field of early childhood education. I had written about what I called the 'chimera' of child care - noting how apparent political support for child care frequently serves neither to expand or to stabilise the program, but to do the opposite - to deflect attention away from the fact that public child care remains residual, outside of mainstream social programs (Hayden, 1992, 1993a, 1994).

In my analysis of why child care as a public program has not, in 29 years, delivered itself from its crisis status, I pointed to the diversity of stakeholders with opposing, conflicting goals. I identified five broadstroke groups of stakeholders who had different reasons for promoting different aspects of child care. The goals of these stakeholders have been thwarted because they have been fighting each other rather than identifying their touchstone and promoting their common interests. Although seemingly contradictory, all these stakeholders are united by the fact that they benefit (albeit in different ways) from the concept of out of home child care and from government support in one form or another for a child care infrastructure (Hayden, 1993b).

The conflict, however, plays into the hands of a more insidious and pervasive group of stakeholders whose interests lie in impairing, indeed reversing, the very notion of public child care. Faludi call these the 'backlashers' and I have, elsewhere, used the term 'resisters'. Resisters are opposed to public support for child care and think that families (read 'mothers') should maintain full responsibility for their own children (Hayden, 1993c).

In the mid 1990s, ECCE appears to be on the brink of changes with accreditation, tax deduction systems, employer incentive policies, sick leave. Some of us are getting healthy grants to review the needs for trained personnel and other research issues. Child care undeniably has more presence on political agendas than it did 20 or even 10 years ago. But being on the agenda does not always mean that issues are being addressed. As Stonehouse recently (1992:162) stated:

There is a non trivial distinction between issues related to children being on the political agenda, and children being on the political agenda. The former has been achieved but not the latter.

Indeed, as Faludi points out, the more perceived gains from the promoters of child care (she said 'feminism'), the more ardent is the opposition.

In fact, public child care can be seen to have achieved very little since the hey days of the mid 1970s (Hayden, 1992). The bottom line today is that there are neither adequate policies nor services for more than a fraction of the needy population. Despite the inordinate amount of political activity - rhetoric, budget disbursements, program evaluations and developments, there is no evidence that new parents in 1994 are finding it any easier than they did in the 1970s to access quality care for their infant.

Image and promotion

Faludi argued that the media and popular culture were powerful mechanisms for marketing a particular view of women. This study set out to investigate what was being marketed in terms of public child care.

Two research questions were developed. These were:

- What messages on child care are prevalent in the media and popular culture? and
- What is the public image (impression) of out of home care?

WHAT MESSAGES ON CHILD CARE ARE PREVALENT IN THE MEDIA AND POPULAR CULTURE?

This research question was addressed by analysing the presence and content of characters and issues relating to the care and education of young children on television, in films, and in newspapers and tabloids.

Child care on television: non existent, misleading, whimsical, frightening

Faludi (1991) described how US television and movies reflect traditional families. Her analysis revealed that working women and single mothers were almost non existent on television.

Television from the mid 1980s has reconstructed a "traditional" female hierarchy, placing suburban homemakers on the top, career women on the lower rungs, and single women at the very bottom. Meanwhile, advertisements prefer to reflect the housewife viewer because she is perceived a more passive and willing consumer. Two out of thirty two new shows in 1990 (6%) featured women who had jobs. (Faludi, 1991)

Faludi's findings reflect those of an Australian study (slightly earlier) which was part of this international research on *Television and the Image of the Family*. The Australian chapter was written by Don Stewart under the auspices of the Australian Institute of Family Studies (AIFS) (1986).

The study compared family statistics to the image of the family on TV and found major discrepancies. Stewart (1986) found that:

Families portrayed on television have the traditional conservative aura to them with middle class males in white collar jobs and full time housewife spouses.

In fact, at the time of the study, this 'traditional family' represented less than 25% of Australian society and 60% of Australian families were using some form of child care!

The AIFS study analysed the image of the family under categories such as values, violence, relationships and gender roles, but not child care. The problems and issues associated with child care which permeated the lives of 60% of Australians was a non entity to the AIFS researchers and, apparently, was not depicted on television. But this was in 1986: What is happening now?

An abbreviated form of the AIFS study was replicated in 1993. Prime time television in Sydney was reviewed for one week in September. All channels were monitored for at least 5 hours per day, with a concentration on prime time day and prime time evening slots. The findings revealed that the use of out of home care by television personalities was either nonexistent, whimsical, or misleading.

For example, child care was non existent on *The Cosby Show*. Here the two professional parents (a doctor and a lawyer) never alluded to, nor seemed to need, child care for their five children. Meanwhile, in *Home and Away*, allusions were made about dropping off and picking up a toddler from the preschool. The preschool setting, however, was never shown, nor, for that matter was the toddler!

Child care was deemed to be 'whimsical' in shows like *Murphy Brown*. Here, while child care was a visible issue, and while the maternal conflict for Murphy was portrayed realistically, the

image of the care taker was anti-professional and silly: an untrained but warm-hearted house painter became the 'perfect' care taker.

In a number of programs, the image of child care is misleading. One episode in *Cheers* featured parents seeking to enrol their son in a preschool/kindergarten. The audience sees only a very sterile institutional 'principals's office' where the intimidated parents (both psychiatrists) defend the academic achievements of their five year old son. The scene reinforced a stereotype that children who do not know 'facts' (spelling, arithmetic) may be 'failures' even before they enter the public school system.

In *Full House*, one episode centred upon whether a Mother should accept a prestigious and glamorous job and send her twin toddlers to nursery school. After much soul wrenching, it was decided, finally, that the father would stay home with the children. (A fine solution, but not very realistic for the majority of the population for whom the need for two incomes or for whom sole parenting is a fact of life.)

Outside of the parameters of the study, researchers reported on a non fiction approach to child care which bordered on the horrific. In the months preceding the study, some TV talk shows had given air time to child care issues. In 1991, *Donahue* hosted a series of programs in which parents whose children had been killed in child care centres told their tales of horror. (An American news program called *Prime Time* which has not been shown here but which is aired nationally in the USA had a series entitled *Day Care Nightmares*. These shows displayed stomach turning incidents of abuse and neglect in child care centres taken with hidden cameras.) A major focus of the programs was the deceit of providers who blatantly lied to parents about what went on behind closed child care doors. The implication was, 'Don't trust your early childhood worker!'

Child care in film: anti-professional, negative, or evil

Other aspects of popular culture mirror the television findings. A team of researchers scoured the video shops for films which portrayed child care situations. They found that popular films and videos are reflecting anti-professional, negative and evil images of child care.

In *Kindergarten Cop*, an undercover policeman who learns to control children by blowing a whistle and yelling out orders, military style, is told by the school principal that, even though he has no training at all, he is 'one helluva teacher' and can have a job in that school anytime! In *Baby Boom*, a successful business woman loses her promotion and, finally, her job because she has 'inherited' a young child - and can't seem to manage both. The concept of making use of a child care centre, as about 300,000 working parents in Australia do, never seems to enter the woman's (or movie maker's) mind. She does interview a series of nannies, but they turn out to be religious fanatics, nymphomaniacs, militaristic dictators, or potential kidnappers. In the end, the woman is shown making millions of dollars from home, thus dispelling the need for (and value of) a public system of child care.

The most harrowing portrayal of child care came from *The Hand the Rocks the Cradle*. Here, a family is punished and almost destroyed because they let a stranger care for their child. This film prompted a feature in *Who Magazine* (March, 1992) about real families whose children had been blinded, kidnapped or beaten by child carers. No member of the research team was successful in finding a popular film that displayed child carers and teachers in a realistic, intelligent, positive light.

Child care in newspapers and tabloids: negative and sensational

Perhaps the most prevalent influence on the public image of child care, or on any institution, comes from newspapers and tabloids because coverage is so broad and consistent. In Western Sydney, where the media has been surveyed, sensationalism and exploitation of child care stories are rife.

One hundred articles which referred to the care and education of children below school age were reviewed from newspapers and tabloids available to residents of Western Sydney in Spring 1993. (All major newspapers and local tabloids were included in the study.)

Of these, 19 articles were rejected as being unclassifiable, covering too many categories, or not directly related to the topic. The message/headlines/prevaling impression of the remaining 81 articles were analysed.

The articles were analysed within three categories. These were:

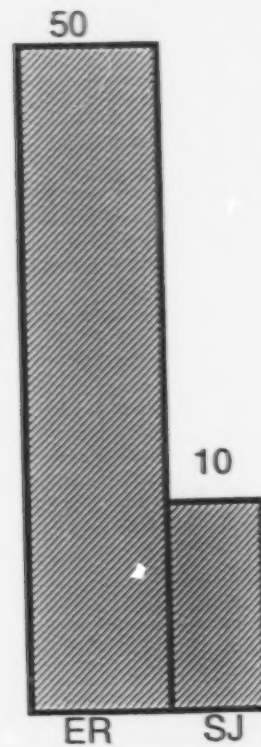
- #1 Social justice vs economic rationalism: Did the article associate child care provision with social justice goals, benefits to children and/or to society or with financial issues, productivity, cost savings and other economically rational issues?
- #2 Positive versus negative images: Did the overall impression garnered by the article provide a positive or a negative image of child care, child care teachers, child care usage?
- #3 Employers in child care: What is the image of employer supported child care?

Findings from analysis of child care in the print media

#1 *Social justice vs economic rationalism:*

Of 60 articles which could be classified in this way, 10 focused on positive aspects of child care (no article mentioned child care a beneficial social program) and 50 focused on the cost of child care, or on adult centred benefits such as increased workforce opportunities emanating from child care provision, and/or the article described child care as an economic program. (Some of the economic oriented articles did mention benefits to children in passing, but this was not the focus of the article.)

Graph 1: Newspaper articles which describe social justice vs economic rational orientation for child care (N = 60)



- ER Child care is a production oriented, employment related and/or cost saving program
- SJ Child care is good for children/society

#2. Positive versus negative images:

Of 44 articles which could be classified in this way, 17 gave positive messages such as 'Child care is a good place for children'; 'Teachers are well trained professionals'; and 27 gave negative messages such as 'Child care is dangerous', a 'ripoff' or 'harmful'.

Graph 2: Newspaper articles which project a positive vs negative image of child care
(N = 44)



#3. Employers in child care:

There was a surprising dearth of newspaper articles on this topic. Only 5 articles referred to the responsibility of employers towards child care. Of these, 4 portrayed employers in a positive light, describing supportive policies and 1 article reprimanded employers for a lack of support for child care. The message *when* this area is breached seems to be that some employees are providing worthwhile perks in the form of child care.

Graph 3: Newspaper articles describing involvement in child care (N = 5)



-VE Employers are not doing enough to meet the child care needs of employees

+VE Employers are addressing child care needs of employees

WHAT IS THE PUBLIC IMAGE (IMPRESSION) OF OUT-OF-HOME CHILD CARE?

One hundred survey questionnaires were distributed to a random selection of the public. Survey questions were asked orally to individuals at shopping malls, at bus stops, and train stations. Some survey questionnaires were handed out at a non related workplace. Respondents ranged in age from 14 years to 74 years of age. Forty eight males and 52 females were included in the study. No other characteristics were noted. The questionnaire consisted of four questions:

- What do you think of (what is your image of) when I mention the term 'child care'?
- Do you think people working in the field of early childhood care and education are professionals?
- What kind of training do people who work in the field of early childhood care and education need?
- Comment on the way child care is portrayed in the media?
- Do you or would you use child care for your own child. Why or why not?

Findings from survey of public at large

What does the public at large think of 'child care'?

The responses were categorised as negative, neutral or positive. The majority (52%: N = 52) of respondents projected a negative impressions of child care. Typical comments from this group were that child care is:

'a government subsidised service for lazy parents' and/or
'an expensive form of babysitting'.

Over one third (38%: N = 38) of respondents gave neutral comments about child care, such as:

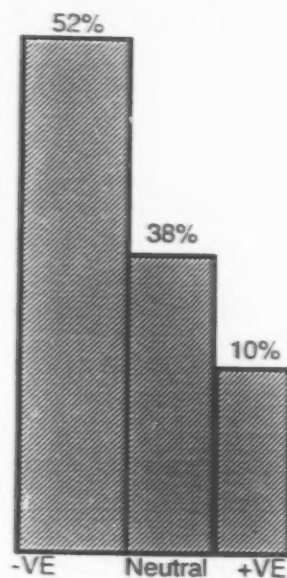
'safe and homelike';
'where children are minded, babysat';
'where children are taught rules and respect'; and

'a place for children who are not neglected'.

A minority (10%; $N = 10$) of respondents answered positively with comments about child care, such as:

'enhances childrens' development';
'enhances social and cognitive skills of young children'; and
'prepares children for school'.

Graph 4: What is the public image of child care ($N = 100$)?



How does the public view early childhood professionals?

Most respondents did not associate early childhood care and education with the need for professional status of workers. In response to the question *Are early childhood workers professionals?*, a minority (20%; $N = 20$) said *Yes. They were, or should be.* The majority (80%; $N = 80$) answered negatively. Some comments included:

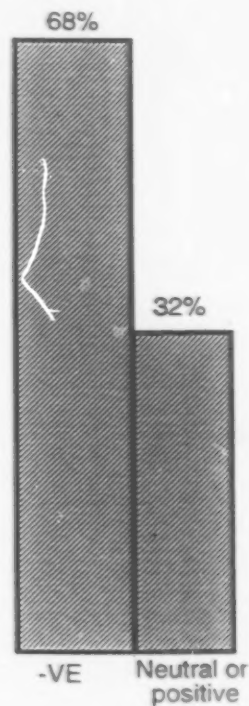
'I am a lawyer so don't expect me to see babysitting as being on the same level as myself';
'Finger painting is not a professional career';
'Only women do it, so no way can it be considered professional';
'It's only glorified home care'; and
'It should be regarded as a professional career but it's not'.

The public is not aware of training requirements for early childhood care and education specialists. When asked to identify training needs, a majority (68%; N = 68) of respondents gave answers which were classified as negative. Typical comments were that child care workers:

'merely play with children';
 'are only babysitting';
 'only need common sense, not training'; and
 'don't need to be trained. It's not like school!'.
 'should have some tertiary training';
 'need to understand children'; and
 'need to know about child development'.

A minority (32%; N = 32) of respondents identified the need for some sort of specialised training. Typical comments from this group were that staff at child care centres:

Graph 5: What is the public image of child care professionals (N = 100)?



What does the public think about the portrayal of child care in the media?

Respondents were aware of negative press concerning child care. Nearly all respondents (98%: N = 98) felt that child care was not well represented in the media. A majority (86%: N = 86) mentioned child abuse/sexual assault as areas which they hear about most. Of these 61% (N = 61) mentioned the *Mr Bubbles* case which had taken place five years earlier. Responses to this question included:

The media portrayal emphasises -

'child care as a place where uncaring Mums dump their kids';
'how expensive child care is';
'the guilt of parents';
'the funding debates over child care'; and
'sporadic criticisms of the system'.

How does the public feel towards the use of child care?

The public is wary of using child care. The majority of respondents (53%: N = 53) expressed negative feelings. Typical comments were:

'I prefer to use relatives';
'I do not trust EC centres';
'I use it because I have to';
'I don't have to use child care. That's what I have a wife for'; and
'I would not use child care full time'.

Some respondents (47%: N = 47) expressed neutral or positive feelings towards the use of child care. A typical comment by this group was:

'I do use child care, but only for work/career reasons (not because it is a benefit for the child)'.

CONCLUSION

Faludi's comments about the purpose and influence of the press seem appropriate here. When she found damning evidence about feminism in newspapers and magazines she stated that:

The press didn't set out with this (castigating feminism) or any other intention; like any large institution, its movements aren't premeditated or programmatic, just grossly susceptible to the prevailing political currents.

This can be applied to the public image of child care as well. There is no evidence of a malicious conspiracy to focus on the negative. Nonetheless, the prevailing message about child care is one of scepticism and foreboding. Child care is not mainstream, common, valued, or even 'normal', nor is it portrayed (for the most part) as being of any benefit to children.

Faludi warned that the most insidious effect of the a bombardment of a negative image of women was that the women themselves were susceptible to it: 'It is most powerful when it goes private, when it lodges inside people's minds and turns their vision inward, until they imagine the pressure is all in their head, until they begin to enforce the backlash too - on themselves' (Faludi, 1991:xxii).

This study revealed that the public image of early childhood care and education which is 'lodging inside people's minds' is a predominantly negative one. Of one hundred person-on-the-street

interviewees, the majority were shown to be unaware of the positive attributes of a quality child care program. Respondents preferred not to use out of home child care if it could be avoided and did not think that training (certainly not University training) was necessary for child care teachers. Many respondents associated child care publicity with the 'Mr Bubbles affair'. Amazingly, this 1988 case was still making headlines in 1994. Six years after the affair, *Mr Bubbles Sensation* screamed the front page headlines of the Sydney Telegraph on March 2, 1994. Although the Telegraph article indicated that perhaps the whole incident was not as horrific as originally portrayed, the headlines and picture of the accused perpetrator looking decidedly evil, six years later, served once again as a reminder of the fact that these type of things could and do take place.

Like Faludi, I do not believe that there is a media conspiracy. However, I do think that there is complacency by professionals and others. By failing to promote a more positive image, we are contributing to the prevailing vision (or lack thereof) of child care. We need to be focused and deliberate. We need to do some proactive marketing. We need to develop an early childhood image which reflects a positive and professional and social justice approach to early childhood care and education. We need to eradicate Mr Bubbles once and for all.

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